

BROUGHT INTO THE STORY

SERIES: FINDING YOUR PLACE IN THE STORY

By Danny Hall

Perhaps you remember an occasion when you heard a little snippet of a conversation that you reacted to, and you jumped into the middle of the conversation, only to have the others look at you as if you were nuts. You suddenly realized that you didn't know what they were talking about because there was a lot more to the story. We've probably all been in that situation. Many times in life we develop responses to narrow bits of knowledge before we have the whole story.

Back in 2001 we were taking a family vacation in Mexico right before our son Christopher was going off to college. I got up the morning after we arrived and flipped on the TV to get any important news, like who won the baseball games the night before, and the screen was filled with images of smoke pouring from skyscrapers and crazy things, planes flying into buildings. The television feed that we were getting in our hotel was from the Bay Area, and so my first thought was that something awful had happened in San Francisco, and I was horrified, thinking perhaps people I knew were involved. But as I listened, I realized they were talking about something far different. They were talking about the 9/11 attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C. I was overwhelmed with that story, but there was a side of me that was actually relieved to find out that at least this wasn't happening in my own backyard.

Responding to only part of the story is a problem we sometimes have when we think about the gospel message. I'm going to tell you something that you have probably heard over and over again: God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life. But you're sinful, and because of that you're separated from God. Therefore you cannot know and enjoy God's plan for your life. But Jesus died for you so that you could be forgiven. You need to personally accept this by faith in order to know God and experience his wonderful plan for your life.

Now, this is a really good story. It's full of all kinds of good news. The problem is, it's not the whole story. But in the Christian culture that most of us have grown up in, we've grown very used to hearing the gospel reduced down to those elements. And when that happens, we can get the idea that, as beautiful and wonderful as that story is, it's really fairly small. We have lost something very important by not understanding the big story of which that story is only a little slice.

We're studying the book of Ephesians. This book is about what it means to live out our faith. In the last two messages we looked at the first chapter of Ephesians, which is all a long prayer. The first half of the chapter is Paul's praise to God for his incredible story of salvation and his purposes in the world. The second half is Paul's prayer that the recipients of his letter will grasp how beautiful this grand story is. Now in chapter 2 Paul is going to start dealing with the specifics of the story, enlarging our understanding of this incredible thing that God is doing. The passage that we're going to look at in this message, Ephesians 2:1-10, is more or less the introduction to this big story.

Now, in this passage are two of the more famous verses ever written by the apostle Paul, Ephesians 2:8-9. If you're like me, early on in life you were challenged to memorize some Scripture, and Ephesians 2:8-9 was right up there at the top of the list. These are great verses. But as great as they are, they're only a little piece of the story. We need to know the whole story that God is trying to tell us.

These ten verses fall roughly into three parts. The first part talks about the problem that humankind has of being alienated from God. The middle part talks about what God has done to solve that. And the last part explains the middle part in a little more detail to help us grasp the big picture of what God is doing. Let's begin by looking at Ephesians 2:1-3:

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.

When Paul uses the word "you" here, we need to remember he's talking to Gentile believers in the churches in and around Ephesus. Now, these words are of course applicable to all Gentile believers. He describes them this way: "You were dead in your transgressions and sins...." God created human beings in his own image, for fellowship with him. But sin came into the world,

and because we were born in that sin, something essential to our humanity died, and we were no longer fully human. We were dead, separated from God.

He continues: “In which you used to live when you were following the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.”

Paul is drawing a picture of the world in which we lived out our deadness. There are two parts to it. First, if you take people who are dead in their transgressions and sins and turn them loose to create their own world apart from God, what you get is the sad state of affairs that we find ourselves in. They follow the ways of this world—systems of thought, politics, and economics; and personal and corporate and societal relationships—that reflect the deadness of who they are. And none of us has to look very far to see the reality of this in our own lives and in society. There is much that is messed up in our world. But it was developed by people who were dead spiritually, not fully human, and this is the best that they could come up with. It’s a tragic, horrible thing.

But second, and even worse, this world is being influenced by Satan himself. In a later message we’re going to talk a bit more about spiritual warfare, about Satan’s deception in our lives and how that works out, so I won’t go into a lot of detail about that now. Paul only foreshadows here what he’s going to explain later by saying that the ruler of this world has been influencing the world to continue down the path of destruction it’s on. Because of Satan’s deception and temptation, and because of the very lostness of who we are, this is the sad world we’ve got.

That's the description Paul gives of the Gentiles. But he doesn't let himself off the hook, because in verse 3 he speaks of "all of us." He includes the Jews like himself, who should have known better. "All of us also lived among them—among people who were living in this world of deadness—gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts." If we read between the lines, he's saying, "We Jews are just like the rest of you. God had chosen us for himself and had manifested his presence among us. We had the Law. But despite those great advantages, we decided to live for ourselves anyway, and we were caught in the same trap that you were. We were just living out the desires of our flesh." So where will we all end up? "Like the rest, we were objects of [God's] wrath."

So in three verses Paul sums up his entire theology of sin and alienation from God. In one fell swoop he gathers up the three great arenas of problems that we face: first, the world, meaning the world system and philosophy of life and worldview that have grown up over the centuries as sinful people developed society; second, the sinful nature, our own natural desires; and third, Satan himself. That triad of evil influences appears all through the Scriptures. That's the sad situation we find ourselves in, and we got there by our own choices.

But now in verses 4-7 he shares with us God's solution to this problem:

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he

might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

This is his answer. Out of his rich and merciful heart, God did three things: he made us alive with Christ, he raised us up with Christ, and he seated us with Christ.

First, we were dead and now we're alive. That core of who we are that died because of the sin that marred our essential humanity, has been made alive with Christ! We are united with him because of what he has done. We are back on the path to the fullness of humanity that God has wanted for us all along.

Second, God raised us up out of the mire, out of the trap that we were caught in because of our own sinfulness and weakness, because of the systems of this world. He raised us up out of that just as he raised Christ from the dead.

Third, he seated us with Christ in the heavenly realms, so that what is true of Christ is true of us. When Paul says "heavenly realms," he means the spiritual kingdom of God that we are now part of. This isn't someplace far off in the cosmos that we're transported to in some disembodied state. It simply means we are now united with God in the fullness of who we are, and the fullness of the spiritual realm has been restored to us, and we're part of God's spiritual kingdom. Being seated with Christ refers to the place of authority and power and privilege. Because we are united with Christ, that's where God has placed us.

Now, God did all this for us, but notice that he didn't do it just for us. In the interesting verse at the end of this section, Paul says the reason that God did this is "that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus." What is Paul talking about here? Well, even though God has reached down into the mess of our world to rescue people through what Christ has done, we're all very keenly aware that the world is still a mess. And there's a lot of time in your life and mine when it certainly doesn't look like God is winning, does it? It looks like evil is winning, and the world is just getting worse, and this whole thing is overwhelming—where is God? So this is Paul's way of saying, "Hang on! God's work has begun, and it's not over yet. One day everyone is going to see just how gracious and kind God was toward us, because that work is going to be finished, and his kingdom is going to be established. That's going to be a grand and glorious vindication of God and also of us who have placed our faith in him."

Then in verses 8-10 he offers two explanations to fill out what he means here a little bit more.

The first explanation is in the well-known verses 8-9:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.

Paul's first explanation of what God has done is simply this: it's all from God, not from you. It's his initiative from beginning to end. Our being rescued and entering into God's kingdom, being made alive and raised up and seated with him, are all at God's initiative, through his grace. We access his grace through our faith, but then he goes on to say that even that is a gift of God. And

his whole point is simply to remind us that in our deadness and lostness and rebellion and alienation from God, if God had not reached down to draw us to himself, we never would have gotten there. So where does that leave us? If my salvation in no way comes from me, then there's nothing for me to boast about.

Now, the whole first half of Ephesians raises one of the great questions of the ages: How can God's sovereignty and our free will both be true? Here is the definitive answer: we don't know. I've wrestled with that question just as many other people have. It's one of the great mysteries of God's grand design that he loves us enough to invite us into relationship with him and allows us to freely come and place our faith in him, but we would never have gotten there if he hadn't drawn us.

The second explanation of this great thing God has done is in verse 10. Here is where we need to pay attention, because God is now inviting us to broaden our view, to look beyond the tiny slice we're so familiar with:

**For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works,
which God prepared in advance for us to do.**

When God reaches down to rescue me, he invites me into the larger story of what he is doing. He gives me something to do, a role to play in the grand story. That is an amazing thing! You see, salvation is not just about not having to go to hell, which is the message I grew up hearing. Now, whatever eternal consequences are out there for my sin, I don't want to experience them. That's

surely a legitimate way to think. But it's so narrow, it misses the point of the big picture of what God is doing. Salvation is far more than that.

Now, verses 9 and 10 pose a problem for us. In verse 9 he says none of our salvation is of works, lest we should boast, but then in verse 10 he says God created us to do good works. But in verse 9, when Paul uses the word "works" and says we're not saved by that, he primarily has in mind his Jewishness. Paul often uses the word "works" to talk about how he had to learn that just doing the things that marked him out as a Jew—circumcision, following the Law, the dietary restrictions, temple worship—did not commend him to God or make him right with God. And in every context we all devise ways that we hope we will commend us to God. Different religions do it different ways. Even people who are irreligious do it certain ways. But those kinds of works, Paul says, don't get you anywhere.

However, it's also missing the point to consider salvation as the opportunity to just sit back and enjoy the rest of our lives because we're not going to hell anymore. God is at work, and he calls us as his people to be a part of his grand story. The good works that he calls us to do flow out of that gracious relationship God has initiated with us.

Now, the specific good works he's talking about, he's actually going to open up a bit in chapters 4 and 5, which Steve Zeisler is going to lead us through. In 4:1 he says, "Live a life worthy of the calling you have received." That is, if you're part of God's kingdom, it means you're going to live a certain way to demonstrate God's love and grace to the world.

Sometimes evangelicals have been afraid to talk about the idea of good works, because we may sound as if we mean our salvation is based on these works. So we've almost forgotten that God saves us to be a part of his story and gives us a role to play. Remember in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, "You are the light of the world....Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:14a, 16.)

How do we demonstrate that God's way is the way toward full humanity? Collectively, as the church, we live out kingdom values, in the power of his Holy Spirit. We care about justice. We care about mercy. We care about people whose lives are being ruined, both by their own choices and by the systems in which they live. We compassionately want to help them be rescued through God's grace, as we have been rescued. So we stand for the things that matter to God. We trust God and get out of our comfort zones. We're part of this larger story of God's redemptive work to demonstrate righteousness and his love and care for the world. God has given us a role to play.

So we find ourselves right in the middle of God's own story. We're characters in the grandest drama ever written. It all flows out of what God has done in Christ, but he invites us to participate. That's a lot more exciting than simply not going to go to hell!

The grand story is that God is doing something wonderful, and he loves us enough to give us something to do. Talk about significance! God's message from the start has been, "Do you want to be significant? Be a part of what I'm doing. All these other things that you're frittering away your energy on aren't going anywhere. But I've got something that's heading toward a grand

conclusion in which every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord (Philippians 2:10-11), and a new heaven and a new earth are going to be created, and you're going to live forever in fellowship with me in the midst of that, and the whole earth is going to be filled with my glory! I'm building this eternal kingdom, and I'm asking you to be a player in that!" Now, that's a story worth giving your life to!

As we'll see in the next message, the first and foremost way that we show our good works and build the kingdom of God is to tear down every human barrier that keeps people separated from him. That's the main argument Paul is making in this book. This world is so messed up that all we know how to do is protect ourselves by erecting barriers—political systems, economic systems, racial systems, generational systems.

Recently I was invited to attend a meeting at the Zeislars' home with Dr. John Perkins, the author of the book *Let Justice Roll Down* (1) and the founder of the Voice of Calvary ministry in Mississippi. His personal story is amazing. He's seventy-six years old now, still championing the cause of God's kingdom in beautiful ways, actively seeking to energize the church of God to be involved in the ministry of sharing the gospel and standing for justice and human rights as kingdom people. He was in town to consult with some folks about new ministry initiatives that are going on in East Palo Alto.

I was very fortunate to get a few moments off to the side with Dr. Perkins after the meeting had broken up. I told him that I was once in Jackson, Mississippi and lived in rural Mississippi for a while. We started comparing notes. One of the stories we were talking about was the election of

the first black County Commissioner in Quitman County. I had moved there right after that happened, and it was big news. Dr. Perkins had been partly responsible for getting that man elected. It reminded me that society there in the late 1970s was still amazingly filled with racism and hatred and division. We talked about how the progress that has been made has come in great part because the people of God faced up to the sin of that and saw God begin to transform race relations. It was wonderful to talk to Dr. Perkins. I encourage you to read his story, because he had every reason to be filled with bitterness and hatred, and yet he is filled with grace and forgiveness and purpose. God took his broken life, turned it around, and then brought him into his great story and gave him a role in that. That's what it's all about.

Now, I want to speak a word of caution. One of the things you can sometimes take away from a message like this is guilt. "I've just got to do more." That's not my purpose. Rather, what I hope God's Spirit will do in your heart is get you excited about the possibilities. God has gifted you and called you and placed you somewhere where you can give your life to his kingdom. That's an exciting thing! So I hope that you'll be opened to what's in God's heart, and you'll just be excited about being a part of what God is doing.

I see this in people all over our church. There are people who regularly visit a nursing home in Los Altos and do worship services there. Others help out with ministries in East Palo Alto. We just had a wonderful testimony by an eighty-nine-year-old man named Mitch who came to the Lord not long ago because John McMullen was talking to him out on the golf course and invited him to a Bible study, and God changed Mitch's life. John McMullen is an older man himself who works at the Palo Alto Golf Course. He loves to tell people about Jesus, so he met Mitch,

and all of a sudden Mitch was standing in front of the congregation in tears because God had saved him. And John was just being a friend. There are a lot of great things that God is doing. I don't want you to feel guilty, but I want you to feel motivated! I want God's Spirit to say to your heart, "We can change the world!" That's what God is about. Let's get on board and be a part of it.

Notes

1. John M. Perkins, *Let Justice Roll Down*, © 1976, Regal Books, Ventura, CA.

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Ephesians 2:1-10

Third Message

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